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SIPDIS

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TAGS: [ECON](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [SOCI](#) [CO](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: LA GUAJIRA AND CESAR--SHARED INDIGENOUS
POPULATIONS AND SECURITY CHALLENGES

REF: BOGOTA 4304

Classified By: Political Counselor John S. Creamer.
Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (U) Cesar and La Guajira departments share significant indigenous populations and security issues, including the presence of FARC, ELN, and criminal groups. The indigenous in the region have great cultural differences, but express a common distrust for the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC) and the Nasa indigenous group in Cauca department. The indigenous in Cesar and La Guajira report excellent relationships with the GOC, but voiced concern about corrupt local officials. Mining royalties, high unemployment, and a strong contraband tradition contribute to public corruption. Senior security officials note significant recent demobilizations and a maintenance of security improvements under democratic security. OAS Mission in Support of Peace (MAPP/OEA) officials told us homicides are on the rise in Southern Cesar and Northern Guajira due to emerging criminal groups and infighting over drug routes. End Summary.

¶2. (U) La Guajira and Cesar departments are located in the Northeast corner of Colombia bordering Venezuela. Guajira has about 280,000 indigenous--the most of any department in Colombia. Most of the indigenous are Wayuu, the largest single indigenous group in Colombia with about 149,000 members. Cesar's population is about 20% indigenous, most belonging to the five main indigenous groups of the Santa Marta Sierra Nevada--the Arhuaco, Wiwa, Kogui, Yuko, and the recently re-established Kankuamo. Almost all Wayuu speak Spanish, while about 80% of the indigenous of the Sierra Nevada speak Spanish.

Indigenous of the Sierra Nevada

¶3. (U) Numbering 45,000, the Arhuaco, Wiwa, Kogui, Yuko and Kankuamo share similar cultural beliefs but speak separate languages. An Arhuaco priest (Mama) told us the indigenous of the Tayrona Sierra Nevada believe that if they protect their sacred mountains, they will keep the entire planet in balance. He voiced concern that this goal has become more difficult due to the presence of illegal armed groups, colonos (land invaders) and so-called economic development projects. He said the Arhuaco have a different view of development based on ecologically-friendly subsistence farming. Tayrona Indigenous Confederation (CTI) Secretary Jeremias Torres praised a GOC project to build a belt of nine

indigenous towns around the Sierra Nevada to protect the local environment, noting the investment in infrastructure, health, and education. To date, three towns have been completed.

¶4. (U) MAPP/OEA Regional Director Ivo Ferreira told us the Sierra Nevada indigenous, and in particular the Arhuaco, are known for their unity and independence. The Arhuaco expelled a Catholic religious order from their territory in 1983 after a 70-year presence, and recently asked the police to leave. Torres said the Arhuaco resented the road built by the priests to their sacred capital Nabusemake, as well as the priests' attempts to eliminate their culture through the provision of churches, a school, and a hospital. Colombian National Police (CNP) Commander Carlos Suzunaga told us the CNP respects the law-abiding Arhuacos, and withdrew from their territory at the Arhuacos' request. In contrast, the Arhuacos welcome an Army presence because it deters the FARC. Ferreira said over 40 Arhuaco were paramilitaries, but never formally demobilized due to fear of Arhuaco leader retribution.

¶5. (U) Torres told us all of the Sierra Nevada indigenous belonged to the CTI until 1990, when each indigenous left to form its own association. Only the 30,000 Arhuaco are now CTI members. The various groups only cooperate to seek land concessions from the GOC. Arhuaco leader Wilber Mestre said the Arhuaco are members of ONIC, but believe the ONIC's leaders have their own political and financial agendas which do not necessarily reflect those of the Sierra Nevada groups. The Arhuaco do not support expanding the Permanent Settlement Forum (Mesa Permanente de Concertacion) to include

social movements and human rights groups--a demand made by indigenous participating in recent protests. (see reftel). Mestre said that because the Arhuacos did not participate in the recent protests, they were being labeled "Uribistas" by other indigenous.

The Wayuu

¶6. (C) Wayuu indigenous leader Claudia De Luque told us the Wayuu culture, unlike the neighboring indigenous of the Sierra Nevada, is individualistic and quite westernized. She said "rancherias," which are extended family farmsteads made up of several huts, form the center of Wayuu life. The isolated homesteads discourage greater civic unity. She said most Wayuu want their children to receive university education, and support all types of development projects. De Luque said over eight Wayuu organizations exist, all claiming to represent all Wayuu. She told us that "maybe in a 100 years" the Wayuu would be able to unify like the Nasa in Cauca, adding that the Wayuu distrust both the Cauca indigenous and ONIC. Still, she said 100 Wayuu representative participated in the November 20 protest march in Bogota--a small number given that the Wayuu are the largest indigenous group in Colombia.

¶7. (C) De Luque said the Wayuu enjoy an excellent relationship with the GOC, but voiced concern that corrupt local officials deny identity cards to many Wayuu to prevent them from voting against them. Many Wayuu have left for Venezuela to receive free handouts. De Luque said the high homicide rate within the Wayuu was caused by revenge killings among feuding rancherias, exacerbated by widespread narcotrafficking, extortion, and contraband profits. CNP Commander Suzunaga said it is difficult to investigate Wayuu revenge killings, since the communities refuse to cooperate. He blamed Wayuu internal conflicts for a recent rise in the department's murder rate, saying the CNP and military prefer to allow the Wayuu to settle their own disputes.

Armed Groups, Narcotrafficking, Corruption

¶8. (C) Army 10th Brigade Commander Ivan Pineda said Cesar and La Guajira have been the home of numerous illegal armed

groups for many years. Valledupar's most famous residents include jailed FARC commander Ricardo Palmero (Simon Trinidad) and paramilitary Rodrigo Tovar (Jorge 40)--both neighbors and classmates. He said the 10th Brigade's 10,800 soldiers maintain security in La Guajira and Cesar. Pineda said the FARC has a limited presence in his area of responsibility, The FARC's 19th front only has 15 operatives in the Sierra Nevada, and the FARC's 59th front mainly stays on the Venezuelan side of the border. Ten FARC have demobilized from both the 19th and 59th so far in 2008. Pineda said the ELN's Northern front only has about 30 men left after 30 more demobilized earlier this year.

¶9. (C) Pineda said fliers for the Autodefensas Gaitanistas were merely narcotrafficker Daniel Rendon's (Don Mario) attempt to intimidate the public and project a political front. Ferreira claimed emerging criminal groups are on the rise in departments, with former demobilized and other criminals joining forces. MAPP/OEA Francesca Viva told us the situation in Southern Cesar is as bad as Southern Bolivar--15 demobilized were killed in Aguachica, Cesar in one month due to their criminal activities. Criminal groups had corrupted all public institutions save the Human Rights Ombudsman (Defensoria). She said the former police commander was clean, but retired early to distance himself from corruption. Pineda said Venezuela-based "Pablo" controlled many narcotrafficking activities in the region--the CNP has seized 20 tons of cocaine so far in 2008, primarily in northern Guajira.

¶10. (C) Riohacha Mayor Jaider Curiel said the Wayuu make up 45% of the city's population. The primary sources of employment are the municipal and departmental governments--MAPP/OEA Regional Officer Abimael Sanchez said local government jobs were a popular kick-back. Sanchez explained that many municipalities in Cesar and La Guajira receive large gas and mining royalties, a source of further abuse. Many well-funded towns have miles of bike paths, yet do not have potable water. Curiel voiced concern over the commercial impact of frequent protests due to water and power

shortages. It was common for protesters to block main roads nine times per day. Curiel said recently 45 local businesses reported extortion attempts. Contraband imports from Venezuela (gasoline, guns) and exports (drugs) were embedded in La Guajira's 80 year old contraband culture. No GOC official dared to cut off this economic lifeline.

NICHOLS